

Listeria infection (Listeriosis)

❑ WHAT IS IT?

Listeriosis is a serious infection caused by eating food contaminated with the gram-positive bacteria *Listeria monocytogenes*. The median incubation period is 21 days, but can be up to 70 days.

Foods commonly associated are raw/unpasteurized milk or milk products, such as soft cheeses (i.e., brie, blue-veined cheese, Mexican-style fresh cheese), ice cream, raw vegetables, fermented raw-meat sausages, raw meats (any kind), deli or luncheon meats, and refrigerated meat spreads, pates, or smoked seafood. Canned fish, meat spreads, or pates are thoroughly cooked in the canning process and are not associated with listeriosis. Any ready-to-eat foods should be cooked thoroughly before eating.

Listeriosis can cause blood stream infections, meningitis, encephalitis and intrauterine or cervical infections in pregnant women, which can result in spontaneous abortions (2nd/3rd) trimester or stillbirths, and febrile gastroenteritis.

❑ WHO IS AT RISK FOR SERIOUS LISTERIA INFECTION?

Pregnant women, newborns, persons with weakened immune systems; individuals with AIDS; cancer, kidney disease or diabetes; the elderly; and anyone being treated with immunosuppressive drugs such as steroids are at especially high risk for developing listeriosis. Healthy adults and children may become ill from listeria, but they are less likely to develop serious infections.

❑ SYMPTOMS

Listeriosis causes fever and flu-like symptoms such as fever, muscle aches, and gastrointestinal symptoms such as nausea, vomiting and diarrhea. Symptoms of headache, stiff neck, confusion, loss of balance or convulsions can occur if the infection has spread to the brain or spinal column (meningitis). *Listeria* can cause infection of the uterus and cervix, which can result in miscarriages or fetal death especially when the infection has occurred late in pregnancy.

❑ HOW IS IT TREATED?

Serious infections are treated with intravenous antibiotics in the hospital.

**Report all King County cases to
Public Health by calling (206) 296-4774.**

What should you do if you've eaten a food that you think may be contaminated or has been recalled because of *Listeria* contamination?

The risk of an individual person developing *Listeria* infection after consumption of a contaminated product is very small. If you have eaten a contaminated product and do not have any symptoms, we do not recommend that you have any tests or treatment, even if you are in a high-risk group. However, if you are in a high-risk group, have eaten the contaminated product, and within 2 months become ill with fever or signs of serious illness, you should contact your physician and inform him or her about this exposure.

❑ HOW CAN YOU REDUCE YOUR RISK FOR LISTERIOSIS?

- Thoroughly cook raw food from animal sources, such as beef, pork, or poultry.
- Wash raw vegetables thoroughly before eating.
- Keep uncooked meats separate from vegetables, cooked foods and ready-to-eat foods.
- Avoid raw (unpasteurized) milk or milk products made from raw milk.
- Wash hands, knives, and cutting boards after handling uncooked foods.

Recommendations for persons at high risk, such as pregnant women, infants and toddlers, and persons with weakened immune systems, in addition to the recommendations listed above:

- Avoid soft cheeses such as feta, brie, camembert, blue-veined, and Mexican-style cheese. Hard cheese, processed cheese, and cheeses and yogurt that have been made from pasteurized milk need not be avoided.
- Ready-to-eat foods, such as hot dogs, bologna, raw fresh or frozen fruits and vegetables, should be cooked until steaming hot before eating.
- Leftovers from meals should be thoroughly heated before eating.
- Avoid deli or luncheon meats, and refrigerated meat spreads, pates, or smoked seafood.
- Canned fish, meat spreads, or pates may be eaten, because these are thoroughly cooked in the canning process.
- Although the risk of listeriosis associated with foods from deli counters is relatively low, pregnant women and immunosuppressed persons may choose to avoid items purchased in deli counters unless they can be thoroughly heated before eating.